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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 002600

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: RULING PARTY, "SECULAR" OPPONENTS CLASH OVER
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

REF: ANKARA 2425

Classified by Ambassador Eric S. Edelman; reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (C) Summary: PM Erdogan's ruling AK Party has introduced a bill that would make it easier for graduates of imam hatip (Islamic preacher) high schools to enroll in university programs other than theology. AK's opponents deride the bill as a threat to the secular State. The opposition Republican Peoples' Party (CHP) and the Turkish General Staff (TGS), along with the Istanbul business establishment, have publicly criticized the bill and called for its withdrawal. President Sezer has also come out against the bill and is expected to veto the legislation if it reaches his desk. Some of our contacts blame AK for provoking the TGS into meddling in politics, thereby undermining Turkey's EU bid. AK leaders maintain the bill would end a policy that unfairly discriminates against Turks who choose a religious education. The Central Bank Governor warned GOT leaders that the controversy has unsettled the markets, and urged them to ease tensions. End Summary.

Bill Panned by TGS, President

2. (U) The parliamentary Education Committee April 6 approved a draft law that would alter the structure of the Higher Education Council (YOK) and make it easier for graduates of imam hatip high schools to enroll in university programs other than theology. CHP MPs walked out during committee debate to protest the imam hatip-related measure, and various elements of the "secular" Establishment quickly condemned the draft law and raised doubts about AK's motives. The TGS issued a statement declaring that the draft would "undermine the principles of unity of education and secular education." (Note: Under a package of constitutional reforms expected to be adopted in Parliament May 7 (reftel), TGS would be stripped of its authority to name a representative to the YOK Board. End Note). President Sezer told reporters that graduates of vocational (including imam hatip) and technical schools should pursue higher education in the same field. His comments are widely interpreted as a signal that he would veto the bill. (Note: Other elements of the YOK bill will be reported septel. End Note).

Controversy Unsettles Markets

3. (C) Central Bank Governor Serdengecti told us that political tension over the bill -- particularly in relation to the TGS statement -- has increased anxiety in the already nervous markets (septel). Serdengecti said he called several Ministers and other politicians to warn them of the consequences and urge them to find a way to ease the tensions. He also said senior Hurriyet reporter Sedat Ergin told him during a dinner hosted by the Ambassador May 6 that the GOT had agreed to withdraw the legislation. The Ankara representative of TUSIAD (Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen's Association) told us TUSIAD has openly broken with the government for the first time to lobby against the bill, and predicted it will not pass.

AK Under Pressure from Hardliners

4 (C) However, there were no signs of a withdrawal April 7. Kemal Kaya, Parliament Technical Affairs Director, and Mesut Koc, Anatolia News Agency Parliament Bureau Deputy Chief, both predicted to us that the AK government will adopt the bill, knowing that the President will veto it. Parliament

can override a veto by passing the legislation a second time, in which case the President must either sign the bill or submit it to the Constitutional Court for review. After the veto, Kaya averred, the GOT will either quietly shelve the bill or override the veto and let the Constitutional Court overturn it. (Note: The GOT could also leave the issue in limbo by declining to either take the bill to the full Parliament or formally withdraw it. End Note). Kaya said AK is under tremendous pressure from its more hardline Islamic supporters, who are frustrated that the party's EU-focused agenda has prevented it from addressing Islamic issues. AK hopes to deflect this frustration by forcing the President or Constitutional Court, bastions of traditional Turkish secularism, to block the bill, he said. Koc said PM Erdogan's silence on the issue indicates he is measuring public reaction before deciding how to proceed. The GOT in October withdrew a similar bill after it drew controversy.

Bill Would Level Academic Field

15. (C) Under current regulations, imam hatip schools are considered vocational schools. The university entrance exam system is designed to channel vocational and technical school graduates into higher education programs in the same field as their high school study. If a vocational school graduate applies for a university program in his field, his exam score is multiplied by a higher coefficient; if he applies for a program outside his field, his score is multiplied by a much lower coefficient. As a result, imam hatip graduates are effectively barred from enrolling in any university programs other than theology. The system of coefficients was established as a consequence of the 1997 "postmodern" military coup. The draft legislation would re-arrange the system of coefficients in a way that would level the field for imam hatip graduates (and other vocational/technical school graduates) applying for the full range of university social sciences programs. AK's opponents view this as an insidious effort to infiltrate Islam-oriented Turks into all elements of government and society. As CHP Deputy Group Chairman Ali Topuz put it, "AK wants imam hatip graduates to become doctors, engineers, sub-governors, officers, and generals." AK leaders counter that the current system constitutes religious discrimination. Tayyar Altikulac, president of the Education Committee, averred to us recently that the whole controversy could have been avoided if the State had simply provided proper religious education in traditional schools. He believes all schools should offer an optional religion course providing more extensive Islamic education than what is now available. "If the (traditional) schools don't fulfill the demand for religious education, the debate will never end," he said.

Controversy has Deep Roots

16. (U) The imam hatip controversy is deeply rooted in the debate over the way "secularism" is defined and enforced by the State. In theory, imam hatip schools serve the purpose of educating future imams. In reality they serve as an institution for pious Turks frustrated with the limited religious education offered in traditional schools. The number of imam hatip graduates far exceeds the demand for imams. Moreover, a large portion of imam hatip students are girls, who cannot become imams in any case, though a few do become scholars of theology or administrators in the Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet). Traditional families often decline to send their sons to imam hatip schools for fear of limiting their career options, instead sending their daughters, whose education they consider less important. Some pious Turks -- including PM Erdogan -- send their daughters to universities in the U.S. or Europe, thereby avoiding both the imam hatip problem and the ban against wearing Islamic headscarves in Turkish universities. Imam hatip schools offer the full curriculum required for traditional schools, and in addition provide Koran and Arabic courses. As a result, it takes four years to earn an imam hatip diploma, compared to three in a traditional high school.

AK Blamed for "Provoking" Military

17. (C) Debate over the bill has also agitated another chronic Turkish controversy -- the role of the military in government and politics. Kaya criticized AK above all for bad timing. Just when Turkey appears to be making progress toward EU membership, AK provokes the military into making a political

statement, he said. Husnu Ondul, president of the Human Rights Association (dominated by non-religious Kurdish leftists), called on the GOT to amend the imam hatip-related portion of the bill, and averred that the TGS statement had damaged Turkey's image in the EU. Faruk Demir, of the Advanced Strategy Center, views the TGS statement as a message that the military is through with sitting on the political sidelines and wants to revert to its traditional role as "defender of the secular State."

Comment

18. (C) Since coming to power in November 2002, AK has fastened its agenda, and its political future, to Turkey's domestically popular EU candidacy. EU membership criteria have provided political cover for AK to pass a range of legal reforms opposed by powerful elements of the military and bureaucracy but demanded by the EU, including measures limiting the political influence of the TGS. However, the Islam-related reforms desired by AK's hardcore religious faithful are not required for EU membership. Those who predict AK will back down on the imam hatip issue may be right -- the party has on several occasions retreated under pressure after raising religious reform. In any case, the President or Constitutional Court would almost certainly block the legislation. Regardless of how this conflict plays out, the broader debate over the role of Islam in Turkey remains unresolved, highly charged, and will continue to force its way onto the agenda.

EDELMAN